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THE INNOCENT VICTIMS OF WAR

BY

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NEVER before do I remember such a September. The golden days slide into the silver nights, and not for one half-hour is there darkness.

Never a cloud, day or night, and when the moon is set, the sky is literally white with stars.

This afternoon, we were sitting under the sycamore beside the stream. Not one leaf moved, and the only sound was the gentle purling of the water. White butterflies flitted to and fro, out in the gold world beyond our dusky shade. Only a stone's throw from us, stood the tiny thatched chapel where the Divine Outcast finds sanctuary.

"All very beautiful, isn't it? You two sitting there without a care in life while men are dying, tortured, and women and children—words fail me. I should like to know what you Catholics make of this war, and what you think of your God now."

Thus was golden peace shattered to fragments by the discord of human speech and thought.

I turned round though there was no need to look. Beatrice turned also and contemplated the Unbeliever. She sat astride of her moor pony, very upright, very indignant—a woman noble in face, character and bearing, but, an avowed atheist.

I sat still, silent. What was there to say? Of what use was it to assure her that men were, are, turning by thousands to the God whom for years, they have flouted? What cared she that the French mob, from expelling

the Religious Orders, are now cheering them for taking arms? What matter to her that men are kneeling down in the open street to make their confessions when they see a priest passing by?

She would have cared for none of it. So I sat silent.

Beatrice rose and sauntered out into the sunshine, bare-headed.

By the pony's side she halted and laid one cool white hand on its neck.

"I know just how you feel" she began, smiling up into the Unbeliever's stern face." And I admire you for speaking out. Most people feel it and pretend they don't. Truth at any price for me."

"You ask me what we think of the war, or, in plain English, what we think of God for allowing what goes on?

Can't you see that the fact of believing in God's existence explains everything? If you really believe in Him, everything that happens must be right."

"Yes, I see it" answered the Unbeliever angrily." But it makes me foam with fury. It seems to me that to believe in a God Who allows such things, makes one dead to all honour and pity and rankly immoral. If He allows such things, that is why I will have nothing to do with Him."

"In other words, you would rather teach Him His business than be taught by Him," said Beatrice demurely. "But, dear lady, don't you see that these vile men are simply scourges in the Divine Hand? They are serving His purpose and turning men by thousands to Him. When His purpose is achieved, the scourges themselves will be destroyed: wrongs will be righted, justice will be done and will reign."

"None of those theories help me a bit. I despise a God Who needs to use such instruments."

Beatrice stood, silent, for a minute, gazing across the amethyst hills. The Unbeliever still sat very bolt upright in her saddle, looking down on Beatrice. I shivered in my chair at the futility and painfulness of the discussion. And then Beatrice suddenly took my breath away.

Looking up into the dark handsome face above her, she laughed wickedly and, apparently, became irrelevant.

"Wait till you are head over ears in love with a bad man. Then you will understand."

To my further amazement, the Unbeliever grasped the point. Without a word of explanation, she understood. In fact, she understood so clearly that she was driven to a jest to hide her confusion.

"Mercy! Help!" she exclaimed, with a forced laugh.

"You understand," smiled Beatrice. "The man must be a bad man or the supreme point is missed. To love a good man doesn't count. Even the heathen can do this. When you love a bad man, it's against nature. That is, it's above nature; it's supernatural. In short, it's LOVE. Nothing less than loving your enemy is love. To really love, you must love someone who is bad in himself and *who is bad to you*. And when you do that, you will understand all mysteries and see clear into the mind and heart of God."

There was a strange silence. It was the Unbeliever who was now gazing out over the calm hills. Beatrice began to plait the pony's coarse black mane into neat little pig-tails.

I watched them both. No greater contrast could be described. In fact,

the contrast was so great that it is banal to record it, except that fact can never be banal. Beatrice is a noble-looking golden-haired woman, and this afternoon she was wearing white. The Unbeliever is also a noble-looking woman, but with night-black hair and brows. Her black habit and hat, her preference for riding astride, give her a masculine air. Beatrice is, above all things, womanly.

They were all three so still that two enterprising butterflies played kiss-in-the-ring round them.

"I—don't—see," began the Unbeliever at last.

Somehow, I felt she would be the first to speak. There had been an air of finality about Beatrice's terse credo.

"At least, I do see what you mean. But I don't say that I agree with you."

"Do you say that you disagree?" asked Beatrice quietly.

"N-o-o," conceded the other, moving restlessly in her saddle. "I will leave the personal element out of it."

Another smile flashed over Beatrice's face, and she began a fresh plait.

"What I mean is, I can see your point; supposing that any one, a woman, for instance, loved a bad man. I can see that she would be willing to suffer to save him. I can see that. But other things bother me. First, would he be worth saving at such a price?"

"If God thought so, wouldn't the woman who loved him?" smiled Beatrice.

"But did God think so? Does He think so?"

"It seems to me," remarked Beatrice, still plaiting, "that I have heard it said

that '*when we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us.' He died for those who hated Him, murdered and outraged Him. They were worth it to Him—worth His blood and His death. He *loved*."

Another silence.

"But, but these innocent women and little children," persisted the Unbeliever.

"Who was more innocent than Christ? That is the very point," said Beatrice, dropping the mane and becoming animated. "Would you have guilty victims? The more perfect the victim the more perfect the atonement."

"And then, it isn't voluntary. I can understand a—a woman, for instance, being willing to die for a man she loved, to save him or to help to save him. But these women and children, they are being insulted and slaughtered

wholesale, without choice and for no one in particular."

"Most of these victims, if not all," answered Beatrice gravely, "are Belgians, and therefore Catholics. And we Catholics are taught from babyhood the great doctrine of reparation, of atonement. From babyhood we pray and suffer and offer our sufferings for the sins of the world. Even when sinners are dead we never leave them, but atone on for them while they pay their debt in Purgatory. From cradle to coffin, that is our life—atonement. And you may be certain that all these people have offered their lives for the salvation of souls. They are willingly paying the price. They are willingly letting their children pay the price. And the children themselves—even if they are too young to make any such offering, they would have done so at a riper age. And God, foreseeing that, accepted it."

“And another thing—why should any such atonement be necessary? Isn’t it enough that Christ died for them?”

“Yes and no,” said Beatrice boldly. “His death saved the world—if it chose to be saved. That is our very faith. But suppose Christ had attached certain conditions to salvation? He did, and has, of course. Well, suppose some souls don’t choose to accept or comply with these conditions? And suppose in His mercy He lets others do so in their stead? Remember what the same man has said. I didn’t mention his name when I quoted him first, and I wont now lest he is anathema to you. But he once hated God and His Church even more than you do. Well, this same man tells us that we are the sons of God, and if sons, heirs; and if heirs, joint heirs with Christ. Now take it naturally and sanely. Can any son and heir be indifferent to the affairs of his father? Or can he be alienated

from them ? If we are indeed the sons of God and joint-heirs with Christ, we must inherit His sufferings as well as His glories. We must care about His interests. His interests are identical with our own.

“And if He is being deprived of His rights, we can make Him restitution. You hinted just now that you don’t want a personal discussion. Well, I don’t mind putting it in the concrete about myself. Say, for the sake of our argument, that I love a bad man who refuses to be reconciled with either me or Christ. Well, I can set my virtue against his sins. I can set my chastity against his unchasteness ; my temperance against his intemperance ; my humility against his pride ; my love against his hatred. And do you think God wouldn’t let it count ? If so, you don’t know God. And isn’t virtue more powerful and more precious than vice ? Of course, because it is eternal and

divine. Vice is finite and diabolical . . . or human. Read mere history, woman. What of the captives who were ransomed by their fellow men? What of the wicked men whose sins were forgiven by kings because of the prayers of their women? Is God less reasonable, less businesslike if you prefer it, than man? It is possible, it is even necessary, to purchase souls at the expense of ourselves, our lives even—to pay to God for them the ransom that they will not pay for themselves. And so far from hating God for permitting it, let us thank Him for allowing us to do it. Love without sacrifice and suffering is not love at all. Even the heathen can love like that. Wait till you love a bad man, as I say. Then you will look into the very heart of God and you will understand all such apparent mysteries. It's the very summit of the mystical life—the atonement *in kind* by an innocent victim."

The Unbeliever looked down into the now flushed face with its shining eyes. Her reply was entirely unexpected and apparently angered Beatrice mightily, though I rejoiced.

"All I have to say is that you are a nobler woman than I am," she remarked gravely.

Then, while Beatrice stood speechless with amazement and indignation, she touched up her pony and was gone.

Beatrice turned, froze any word of mine with one look, and sat down in her chair again.

"How annoying it is the way people get tangled up with me when I am trying to make them see other things," she said, moodily.

I gathered together my scattered remnants of courage and spoke.

“How do you know that all the other things are not mirrored in you, my Beatrice? At any rate, there is one thing I wish. I wish I were the bad man whom you love. And,” I added, taking advantage of her guilty silence, “understand this: your sermon went home because you so obviously spoke from personal experience. That is the only thing which counts. It was worth giving away your secret, Beatrice. She has seen with her own eyes a woman living out her beautiful life for a bad man. From her sister, whom she sees, she will rise to God whom she sees not, and she will see that God is not less loving than you. Then she will catch the infection. She will love, and will therefore, as you say, understand all mysteries, even the mystery of war.”



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